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Mirrors of movement: *Aina*, Afzal Chowdhury's cinematography and the interlinked histories of cinema in Pakistan and Bangladesh

LOTTE HOEK

In 1977 a film was released in Pakistan that broke all box-office records. Running continuously for five years in a Karachi cinema hall, *Aina/Mirror* (Nazrul Islam, 1977) was a massive hit. The story of a society girl and her devoted lover, the narrative offered little innovation; similar tales were, and are, a staple of South Asian film industries. It was the film's other attractions that commanded the volume huge repeat viewing, such as its glamorous actors, catchy soundtrack and spectacular photography of Karachi.¹

How might we place *Aina* within the historical trajectories of the Urdu cinema in Pakistan? Released well after East Pakistan became Bangladesh and West Pakistan became Pakistan, I suggest that the film's innovations and attractions should nonetheless be seen as an outcome of the longstanding collaborations and movements by film personnel across the two wings of Pakistan before 1971. The histories of cinema in Pakistan and Bangladesh are mostly told as separate stories, despite the fact that for twenty-four formative years they existed in the one country.² The larger issue that this essay attends to is the long-term impact of the interactions between East and West Pakistan on the histories of cinema in Pakistan and Bangladesh. I have argued elsewhere that these two trajectories are complexly interlinked,³ and here I want to suggest that our accounts of the cinema in both Bangladesh and Pakistan would benefit from an understanding of this intersection. The period between 1947 and 1971 is significant for the subsequent development of cinema in Pakistan and Bangladesh. When studying this period in either country, the integrated nature of the national film

scene, stretching across both provinces, should be taken seriously. Key secondary resources, such as those by Mushtaq Gazdar and Alamgir Kabir, fail to do so, instead imposing the nation-state's own account of itself onto the material of cinema's history.⁴ While it might be easy to accept the teleological narratives that the nation-state writes for itself (either erasing East Pakistan as a part of contemporary Pakistan or positing it as a proto-Bangladesh), such a perspective obscures more than it reveals. Instead, the approach I take here is to 'follow the thing' (or people, lives, metaphors, and so on).⁵ A methodological crutch for anthropologists wanting to write multi-sited ethnographies, its premises are helpful for breaking the nation-shaped moulds for researching the cinema in South Asia. Following the cinema 'thing', we can trace projects or individuals as their life histories traverse a series of boundaries and borders.

In this essay I follow Afzal Chowdhury, the cinematographer of *Aina*. Starting his career in 1952, he moved across South Asia, working in Bombay, Dhaka, Karachi and Lahore. My text is based on a series of interviews I undertook with Chowdhury in early 2014, when he was eighty-four years old.⁶ Throughout his working life the spaces of what are now Bangladesh, Pakistan and India were inexorably linked, allowing him to build his technological skill and a successful career. Born in Faridpur in eastern Bengal, British India, Chowdhury developed an interest in photography as a boy. In 1952, in his early twenties, he travelled to Bombay across the new international border between Pakistan and India. In his luggage were a Rolleiflex and a flashgun. In Bombay he took and printed photographs that he supplied to the journal *Cinema*, published back in East Pakistan by Fazlul Huq. Then 'it happened one day', as he described his move into cinematography. Serendipitously he was introduced to Bengali cinematographer Sudhin Majumdar,

and from this flowed an apprenticeship with the cinematographers Fali Mistry and Jal Mistry. ‘Basically I learned from him’, said Chowdhury of Fali Mistry. ‘He was famous for low-key photography, like James Wong Howe in Hollywood.’ Learning from the style of his *ustad*, Chowdhury moved from still photography to cinematography in Bombay.

After two years he decided to return to East Bengal, though at that time, there were no film studios in the Eastern province of Pakistan and the cinema halls screened films from West Pakistan, India, America and Europe. Instead, Chowdhury found employment at the United States Information Service (USIS) in Dhaka. ‘They didn’t have anything ... So they asked me to organize it ... I ordered a list of cameras and papers, chemicals, enlargers and driers and all sorts of things.’ The USIS in Dhaka also acquired an Arriflex camera from Germany. ‘They asked me to cover the news. The consul used to open something there and here.’ Chowdhury was given Eastman Colour stock to record the activities of the American consul in East Pakistan, which is where he first learnt to shoot in colour.

When a cameraman from the USIS in Karachi visited East Pakistan, he sought out his counterpart in Dhaka. During a return visit to Karachi, Chowdhury was taken to the Eastern Film Studio. Furnished with letters of recommendation, he was offered a job as chief cameraman there. I asked Chowdhury whether it really was that easy, but he said it was ‘because they didn’t have any sort of experienced people’. Eastern ‘was a new studio in Karachi. The Lahore people didn’t want to come to Karachi because in Lahore there was a big industry. So I was appointed.’ Between 1957 and 1962, Chowdhury worked in West Pakistan, becoming familiar with its directors and producers, including W. Z. Ahmed, who had come to Pakistan after leaving his Shalimar Studio in Pune. ‘I was specialized in colour shooting in those days, because

nobody had the experience.’ He shot the song sequences for *Hum Eik Hain* (1961, Urdu) written and directed by the poet Fayyaz Hashmi, the first film in Pakistan to incorporate colour song sequences into an otherwise black-and-white film. But it was not until Chowdhury moved back to East Pakistan that he would shoot the first colour feature of Pakistan.

In 1962 Chowdhury received a letter and a return ticket to Dhaka from Zahir Raihan, an author and film director in East Pakistan. Agreeing to return to shoot Raihan’s second film *Kacher Deyal/Glass Wall* (1963, Bengali), the return part of the ticket remained unused. *Kacher Deyal* was the start of a long and productive collaboration between Chowdhury and the visionary director in Dhaka. Describing the start of their partnership, Chowdhury said he asked Raihan:

How come you wanted me for this film? He said, ‘look, to be honest, I asked the top cameraman here whether he would work with me if he had to work within my system, creating what I want on the screen’. [But the cameraman] had said [to Raihan] that ... he could not give him more than two or three shots a day.

Chowdhury recounted with glee how Raihan went crazy with anger upon hearing this and extended his invitation to Chowdhury instead.

You see, [what] Zahir Raihan wanted [from me] in *Kacher Deyal* [was] that everything should be in focus. [He said] ‘I don’t want any artist out of focus, from close-up to 50 feet ... everything should be in focus’. I said ‘it’s possible, it’s not difficult’. So I started working.

Chowdhury put his Bombay training into practice to create the dark and depressing conditions of the lower middle-class family that *Kacher Deyal* narrates: ‘It was low-

key photography’. Using the plentiful new lights at the government studio in Dhaka, he achieved his deep focus.

Outdoors I would use a small aperture ... I used that technique *indoors*.

Because, with 11 aperture, you get more depth ... So after shooting for two days we sent it to [the] lab and got it printed and we saw the rush print and [Raihan] was very happy.

The success with which Chowdhury translated Raihan’s ideas to the screen for *Kacher Deyal* paved the way for their subsequent collaborations. Taking advantage of the fact that the government-run East Pakistan Film Development Corporation in Dhaka had the first colour laboratory in the whole of Pakistan, Raihan set out to make Pakistan’s first colour film, *Sangam* (1964, Urdu). Relying on his cameraman’s experience with the format, most of the film was shot in Chittagong district, far away from the Dhaka labs (figure 1). Shooting in difficult hilly terrain, Raihan pushed his cameraman. ‘*Sangam* shooting had a lot of stories, my goodness!’ remembered Chowdhury. ‘The boat racing in the [Kaptai] lake. We had three, four speedboats, controlling them and all this shooting around the hills.’

Chowdhury combined great adaptability with technical skill and an insight into the desires of his directors. It made him a natural choice for the ambitious Raihan. When Raihan set out on his most politically potent project, *Jibon Theke Neya/Drawn from Life* (1970, Bengali), it was Chowdhury who would execute his vision. ‘Zahir briefed me before shooting: “this film I am making is very risky for me. It is very political ...”. At that time there was martial law.’ Chowdhury managed to give visual form to Raihan’s radical ideological position, including a song sequence where he framed raised fists against an expansive sky through low-angle shots. Once

released, the film articulated the spirit of change and discontent that was sweeping the Bengali middle class in the runup to the war that would liberate Bangladesh.

Raihan indirectly ensured that Chowdhury was in West Pakistan when the war started. ‘Zahir Raihan wanted to make a film in Lahore’, said Chowdhury. ‘Since I knew all the studio owners ... he said “you produce the film, I will direct”. ... So we went there and talked to a distributor and studio owner.’ They were successful.

We got advance money from distributors from Lahore, from Karachi, from East Pakistan. Then, Zahir Raihan went back [to Lahore] with his family. He took a big bungalow with about eleven rooms ... And I took all my family and everything ... We migrated.

They all settled in Lahore. ‘Our plan was to make Urdu films and also Bengali films there in Lahore. Because [Raihan] said “making films in Lahore is easier than in FDC ... [due to] the government protocol and all these problems”.’ Their first and last project in Lahore was *Jalte Suraj ke Neeche/Under a Burning Sun* (1971). When one of the film’s heroines had a car accident while filming, Zahir accompanied her back to Dhaka. ‘He couldn’t come back, the war started’, said Chowdhury. Meanwhile Chowdhury himself remained in West Pakistan, looking after the faltering film. ‘We shot, completed the film ... I released the picture [in 1971] and it was tension in those days.’ Chowdhury never saw any financial return on the project.

‘We got stranded’, said Chowdhury of remaining in West Pakistan during the Liberation War in East Pakistan. While Raihan was to make his career-defining documentaries as part of the war effort behind the lines with the freedom fighters, Chowdhury continued to work in Lahore.

For some time, Pakistan didn't recognize Bangladesh. When it did, there were no facilities. And I had a family. I had to feed them, support them ... And then I didn't know whether I will get a job, the situation [in Dhaka was] very bad. Soon after the end of the war, Raihan was killed by opponents of Bangladesh's independence in Mirpur (Dhaka). 'And so we decided we will wait and see ... I had friends, I worked with them. I stayed back.' Chowdhury would stay on in independent Pakistan until 1980. It was during the intervening decade that he shot *Aina*.

Chowdhury was not the only Bengali who decided to stay on in Pakistan after the war of 1971 had made East Pakistan into the independent nation-state of Bangladesh. There was a vast group of East Pakistanis, ranging from servants to posted officers, who got caught up in the aftermath of the war within Pakistan. I asked Chowdhury what it was like in Lahore directly after the war.

It was very nice ... We had a group, a sort of Bengali group you can say: famous music director Robin Ghosh and his wife Shabnam (she was a top heroine of Pakistan in those days); myself; and there was Nuzrul Islam and Rahman; and the very top hero of those days [Nadeem]. He was from Dhaka but not actually Bengali; he was from Hyderabad, South [India]. So this was a very popular unit.

This 'unit' comprised some of the most high-profile individuals in the Pakistan film industry at the time. All had worked in Dhaka, Lahore and Karachi, all were associated with East Pakistan, and had made films in both Urdu and (apart from Nadeem) Bengali. It was this unit that was responsible for *Aina*.

Aina was released in 1977. It was extraordinarily popular and ran for five years at the Bambino cinema hall in Karachi. Chowdhury explained the appeal of the film:

This picture smells like Bollywood hit pictures ... And the music was so good ... We had set one song in Karachi, [on] Clifton beach: the hero on the motorcycle with a red cap, and the heroine [on the] back, singing and moving.⁷ That was a hit. And Karachi city, driving in city streets ... I am following them. Pictorially, it was fantastic ... It was all [this] together: the music, the glamour, picturization and location, and a speed boat.

These elements that contributed to the film's success cannot be understood without taking into account the longer history of cinema in both East *and* West Pakistan.

The glamour of the film was in part derived from the charisma of its protagonists. Nadeem, from a Muslim family in southern India, and Shabnam (born into a Hindu family in East Bengal), had both established their careers through popular Urdu films made in Dhaka in the 1960s. By the time *Aina* was made, both were audience favourites in Pakistan. While Nadeem has been compared to Amitabh Bachchan,⁸ 'Shabnam was to reach heights of stardom rarely achieved by any other actress before her'.⁹ In *Aina*, the love affair between their characters is set against a backdrop of fancy hotels, luxury houses and other sites of 'the new urban fabric of Karachi, with its façade of modernisation'.¹⁰ In the song mentioned by Chowdhury, we see Nadeem waterskiing while Shabnam drives the speedboat dressed all in denim. *Aina*'s roles for Nadeem and Shabnam were a continuation of their figuration in Urdu films from the 1960s. Many of their films made in East Pakistan (*Chanda* [Ehtesham, 1962]; *Talash* [Mustafiz, 1963]; *Darshan* [Rahman, 1967]; *Chand aur Chandni* [Ehtesham, 1968]) narrated the lives of young, modern urbanites, and stood out from contemporaneous Bengali family melodramas and folk films.¹¹ Urdu films from East Pakistan presented the imaginary space of the modern, urban citizen of Pakistan, just as pictured in *Aina*.

But it was the music and cinematography that were particularly praised upon *Aina*'s release. Chowdhury boasted that the critics had suggested that without Ghosh's music and Chowdhury's cinematography, the film was 'nothing'. Gazdar supports this view: 'What made *Aina* different from run-of-the-mill ventures, was the innovation in the picturization of half a dozen enchanting songs composed by Robin Ghosh'.¹³ This picturization was especially enchanting when Chowdhury framed a glamorous-looking Karachi through long shots. Gazdar notes that director Nazrul Islam's 'use of open spaces to create the mood of the scenes ... greatly appealed to the audience'.¹⁴ The cinematography relied on 'juxtaposing the performers in a vast landscape through very, very long to very big shots with smooth transitions ... in *Aina*, it was used imaginatively and skilfully'.¹⁵ It is not hard to see how Chowdhury's cinematography for *Aina* would have drawn on his previous experience, especially his work with Raihan, who had requested deep focus in *Kacher Deyal* and pushed him technically in their outdoor work.

The high production values of *Aina* were impressed upon me by Chowdhury's wife. Proudly, she said that

when *Aina* was shot and the negatives were developed, the [Lab-in-Charge of] Evernew Studio ... kept it as an example on the table. And whenever the cameramen used came to complain to him he said 'see, this negative is from the same lab'.

Chowdhury's extensive experience (in Bombay, the USIS, with Raihan, in the first colour lab in Pakistan, in Karachi and Lahore) undoubtedly equipped him to produce the highest-quality negative from Evernew's laboratory. *Aina*'s 'smell' of Indian cinema would have in part derived from such high production values.

Aina was a special film not just because of its phenomenal box-office success in post-1971 Pakistan. It was the product of a skilled unit drawing on vast experience that emerged out of the movements across the borders of contemporary South Asian nation-states. Because of the peculiarly East Pakistani and Bengali nature of *Aina*'s cast and crew, the long-term impact of the movements across film industries in South Asia is especially visible in *Aina*. But I would see such interrelatedness as a feature of *all* cinema in the region. On first glance *Aina* seems solidly positioned within the trajectory of a Pakistani cinema that is in Urdu and centred on Lahore. But upon closer inspection it is the outcome of complex and often disavowed creative and technical trajectories that nationalist historiographies cannot acknowledge.

In 1980 Chowdhury returned to Dhaka with his family; Shabnam and Robin Ghosh also returned. *Aina* came as an ultimate high-point of two strong decades of Urdu cinema in (West) Pakistan, that faltered by the late 1970s.¹⁶ Recognizing the collapse of the industry, Chowdhury returned to Dhaka. There he found an industry populated with his former assistants and *their* assistants, preoccupied with making fantasy and action films. Labelled a *rajakar* (traitor) for remaining in West Pakistan after 1971, he found it hard to find work again. Not long after returning to Dhaka, Chowdhury retired as a cameraman.

The story of Chowdhury's career, told here from his own perspective and my interpretation of its impact on the film *Aina*, cannot be easily assimilated in a straightforward nationalist film historiography of either Bangladesh or Pakistan. An analysis of *Aina*, Pakistan's great 1970s Urdu box-office hit, would be impoverished by considering it as emerging straightforwardly from (West) Pakistan's Lahore-based Urdu cinema. Both its form and its context of production must be understood within the *longue durée* of the interlinked histories of Bangladeshi and Pakistani cinema. The

articulation of unmarked, or universal, youthful modernity in East Pakistani Urdu films is the antecedent to *Aina*, as well as significant to understanding the family melodrama and the folk film as ‘authentic’ and successful Bengali/Bangladeshi film genres. *Aina* was the outcome of successful teamwork from a film crew who collectively drew on a longer history of the cinema in Pakistan, one not easily allocated to either East or West Pakistan. That history traverses the very boundaries of that now dissolved state and draws upon connections reaching back into (British) India. The work of people such as Chowdhury, Raihan, Ghosh and Islam helped to create key technological innovations and box-office successes that are important to the story of cinema in *both* Bangladesh and Pakistan. We cannot understand one without the other.

This essay is based on interviews held with Afzal Chowdhury, who kindly spent many hours discussing the details of his long career with me. I am very grateful for his generosity. I also want to thank Ali Nobil Ahmed, again, for being an excellent editor, writer and interlocutor.

¹ Mushtaq Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema 1947–1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

² Ravi Vasudevan, ‘Geographies of the cinematic public: notes on regional, national and global histories of Indian cinema’, *Journal of the Moving Image*, no. 9 (2010), pp. 94–117,

<http://jmionline.org/articles/2010/geographies_of_the_cinematic_public_notes_on_regional_national_and_global.pdf> accessed 23 September 2016.

³ Lotte Hoek, 'Cross-wing filmmaking: East Pakistani Urdu films and their traces in the Bangladesh Film Archive', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2014), pp. 99–118.

⁴ Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema*; Alamgir Kabir, *The Cinema of Pakistan* (Dhaka: Sandhani Publications, 1969); see also Vasudevan, 'Geographies of the cinematic public'.

⁵ George Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 24 (1995), pp. 95–117.

⁶ All interviews were in a mix of Bengali and English. All translations are my own.

⁷ The song is 'Wado Karo Sajna', its male vocals sung by Alamgir, the Bengali singer settled in Pakistan.

⁸ Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema*, p. 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁰ Iftikhar Dadi, 'Registering crisis: ethnicity in Pakistani cinema of the 1960s and 1970s', in Naveeda Khan (ed.), *Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 149.

¹¹ The Urdu film from East Pakistan presents the 'unmarked' and locationless modern, while the Bengali film from East Pakistan, in its melodramatic or folk form, is inescapably marked as local, Bengali and specific.

¹³ Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema*, p. 150.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁶ Dadi, 'Registering crisis', p. 146.